

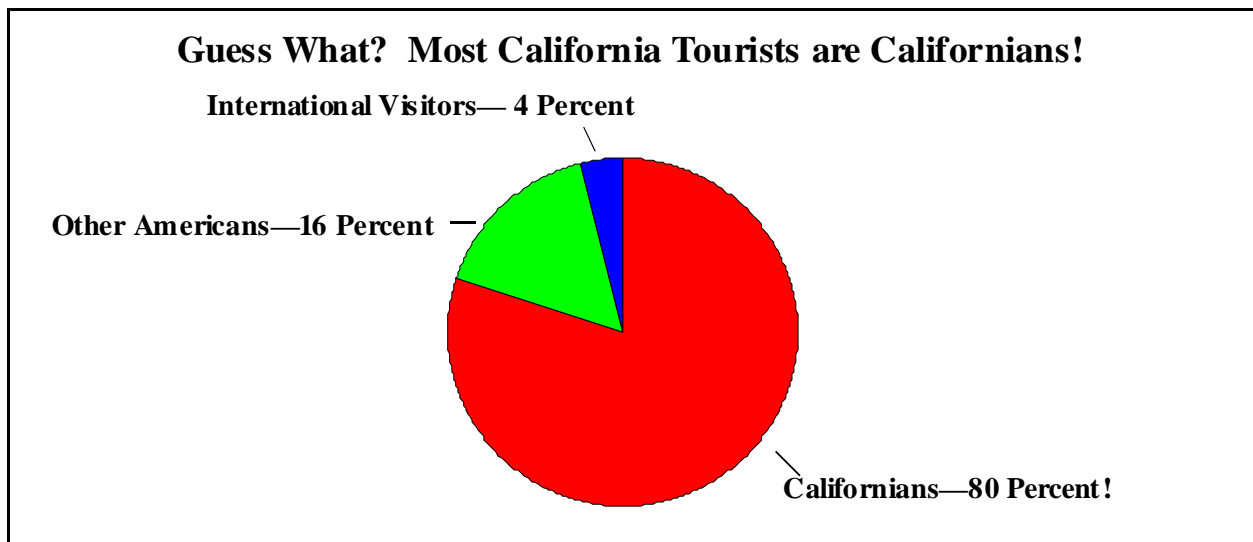
Rural Tourism Marketing

Chapter Four – Who Would Our Visitors Be?

It may not come as a surprise to learn that eight out of ten California tourists are Californians. Another 16 percent are Americans and about four percent are from other countries.

Assuming for a minute that you couldn't advertise your destination to everyone, upon whom would you concentrate? Your answer will probably be Californians, as it likely should be.

Certainly, seeing busloads of Japanese tourists arriving at your destination for a day of shopping, dining and more shopping is the dream of every destination marketing professional. And it's not an unreasonable one. But for our first "fishing trip," let's drop our line a little closer to home.



These figures, like all of those in this handbook, represent the "normal situation" in California tourism. After the tragic bombing of the New York World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, travel statistics are likely to be quite different for some time to come.

As we reported earlier, most travelers use their own vehicles (71%) to get where they're going and generally they like to travel no more than three or four hours to get there.

Day visitors (those who do not spend the night) generally come from no more than two hours away. This can give you a remarkably clear picture of where to concentrate your early tourism marketing efforts.

You might want to take out a map, and draw a circle with your area at the center extending out the approximate equivalent of a four-hour drive. Of course, mountain destinations with slow, winding roads might have to adjust the circle a bit (or even change the shape to an oval or an egg!). For those of you on the coast, feel free to draw a half-circle.



Now take a look for major population center(s) within the circle. If there aren't any, then cheat a bit until you get to one. In all likelihood, you have found your "fishing hole."

Here is a brief exercise to determine possible geographic target markets for your area:

What are the nearest population centers within two hours which might generate day visitors:

1. Name of city/area: _____
Population _____
Hours away by car _____
Miles away _____
Ease of driving (i.e. freeway conditions, road conditions, etc.)
____ Excellent
____ Good
____ Poor
2. Name of city/area: _____
Population _____
Hours away by car _____
Miles away _____
Ease of driving (i.e. freeway conditions, road conditions, etc.)
____ Excellent
____ Good
____ Poor
3. Name of city/area: _____

Population _____
Hours away by car _____
Miles away _____
Ease of driving (i.e. freeway conditions, road conditions, etc.)
____ Excellent
____ Good
____ Poor

In addition to those, what are the nearest population centers within four hours which might generate overnight visitors:

1. Name of city/area: _____
Population _____
Hours away by car _____
Miles away _____
Ease of driving (i.e. freeway conditions, road conditions, etc.)
____ Excellent
____ Good
____ Poor
2. Name of city/area: _____
Population _____
Hours away by car _____
Miles away _____
Ease of driving (i.e. freeway conditions, road conditions, etc.)
____ Excellent
____ Good
____ Poor
3. Name of city/area: _____
Population _____
Hours away by car _____
Miles away _____
Ease of driving (i.e. freeway conditions, road conditions, etc.)
____ Excellent
____ Good
____ Poor

Certainly, people living in the cities you listed above are not the only people likely to come to your community. You may now see people coming through from all areas of the country, and even international travelers. What we are looking for now are those population bases *most likely* to generate new visitors.

Segmenting the Market

Not everyone who lives in the cities listed is *equally likely* to come visit. If your area is located in the mountains, then people who like to hike, camp and fish may be more likely to visit than those who travel for the opening of the opera season.

Nor is it likely that you receive visitors in 12 equal monthly installments throughout the year. If you are located on a beach, your high season is probably in the summer time. If you are a desert community, chances are that more people seek out the warmth of your winters than the heat of July.

Dividing the market into *segments* means taking a look at who comes and when, and who doesn't and why not. For example, "campers" are a market segment, as would be "families with young children" or "seniors." Eventually, we will concentrate our marketing efforts on those most likely to come. This is called "target marketing" because instead of broadly advertising to everyone, you can pick specific media or approaches for a specific group of potential travelers. Tourism marketers generally find target marketing to be more cost effective and successful than non-targeted advertising or promotion. And easier to track!

Seasonality

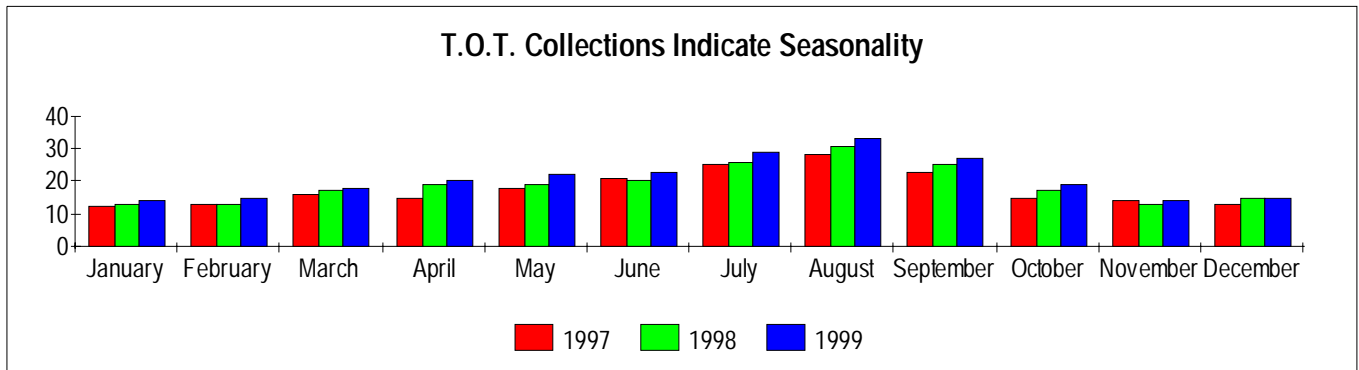
This is the easiest information for you to assemble, and you probably have a good "gut feeling" for the seasonality of your community without any research at all. However, for the sake of accuracy, gather the following information:

1. Contact your city or county finance department and ask for the transient occupancy tax collections by month for the past three years.
2. Use a spreadsheet program such as Microsoft Excel to record the information and create a bar graph using the months of the year across the base and the tax dollars collected by year as your vertical axis.
3. You now have a graph of your seasonality, by month. You now have either proof of what you knew all along, or an eye-opening piece of information.

A Sample Chart of Transient Occupancy Taxes Collected (in thousands \$) by Month

	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December
1997	12	13	16	15	18	21	25	28	23	15	14	13
1998	13	13	17	19	19	20	26	31	25	17	13	15
1999	14	15	18	20	22	23	29	33	27	19	14	15
Total	39	41	51	54	59	64	80	92	75	51	41	43

This Graph Clearly Shows This Destination's Seasonality



Some communities only collect transient occupancy taxes from the hotels by quarter, thus making it more difficult to acquire monthly figures. That means that you will have to get the information from cooperative local hotels. If they won't give you their T.O.T. payments, perhaps they will be comfortable providing you with their occupancy percentage figures by month if you guarantee them confidentiality. Tell them why you are collecting the information, and that you will not share it with their competition, only sharing statistics for your entire area.

Wherever you get the information, creating an official view of your destination's seasonality is the best first step in determining why people visit.

Why do more people visit in July and August than in other months? Is it the weather? Is it fishing season? Is it simply because their kids are out of school? By answering these questions yourself and by seeking the opinions of business people in the community, you begin to see the formation of patterns of visitation.

Other Research Techniques

We now know *when* visitors come, but we still have a long way to go to find out *who* is coming and *why*.

Let's assume that you don't have the budget to hire a professional research firm to study your visitors. There are many ways to conduct research yourself that may not be as professional, but will still give you a good idea of what motivates people to visit your area. You will also find local state universities and community colleges able and willing partners in this process.

Here are some common methods of gathering visitor information that might work well for you:

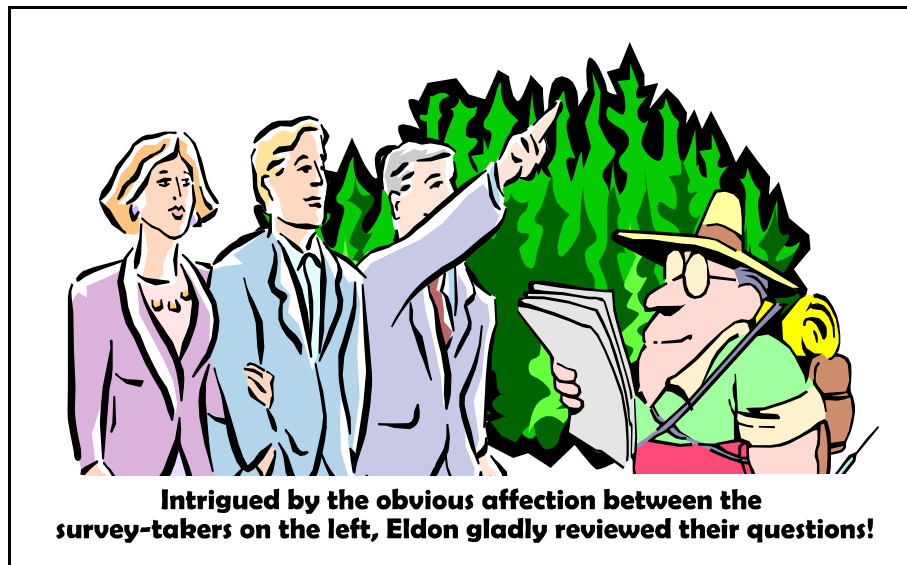
Visitor Surveys – Why not get information directly from the horse’s mouth? There are a variety of approaches here, including asking travelers to fill out a written survey while they are in your area, mailing a survey to their homes after they have left, asking oral questions of visitors at a popular tourist site, or telephoning them at home (preferably not during dinner!). All of these approaches have their advantages, and their disadvantages as indicated below:

1. **Distribute Written Questionnaires Onsite**– Although this is an inexpensive method and the response rate is high, those choosing to fill them out may not be fully representative of all your visitors. (They might be the ones with more time on their hands!)
2. **Mail Out Questionnaires** – The advantage is relative simplicity, the disadvantage again is that those who respond might not be a fair representation of your visitors, you will get a fairly low percentage of them back, and it’s more expensive than distributing them on site.
3. **On-Site Interviews** - Here you get a high response rate and get the information quickly, you can ask follow-up “probing” questions, and visitors have excellent recall of their trip, because they are still there. On the down side, it can be expensive to hire trained interviewers who won’t skew the answers in one direction or another.
4. **Telephone Interviews** – The advantages are a quick yield of the data and a high response rate, the disadvantage is expense, the need for trained interviewers, and the difficulty in obtaining the phone numbers.

Survey of Local Providers – These are the experts in your local area, and you will find them to be a wealth of information, although they might be somewhat biased in the perspective. You can use any or all of the methods listed above (written questionnaires in person or by mail, on-site or telephone interviews). These are the people who know, or at least think they know, who comes to your area now and why. Be careful to include only facts, and not assumptions, in your survey results.

Existing Surveys from Other Communities (Share and Share Alike!) – You are not the first ones to decide to do a visitor survey, and you won’t be the last. Although some communities might be reluctant to share this information with people they might view as competitors, many others will willingly trade information with you. Just remember that every community is different, and that the results of visitor surveys obtained in another community

may not be exactly what you need. You should also be prepared to share any information you gather with those who share with you.



Zip Code Surveys – One of the easiest ways to track visitation to your area is to simply ask your local hotels and lodging establishments to write down the zip codes of every guest who checks in, and pass that information along to you once a month. This will tell you where guests are coming from, in what numbers, and during what times of the year. Be careful to watch for unusually large blocks of numbers from one zip code during one time period, as this could suggest a group of visitors traveling together.

License Plate Surveys – Going to the parking lot of a local attraction or hotel and looking at license plates used to be a popular method of surveying where visitors come from. Although you get a general idea of visitor origin by state, it's difficult to pinpoint the city of residence (rental cars can skew your results), and it's a time consuming way to spend your day. If you do this, make sure you have the permission to enter the private property of any business.

Website Surveys – If your destination website is receiving a lot of attention, you might want to have a contest page where potential visitors can enter to win a trip to your area. Make sure you have a form where they can enter their street address as well as e-mail address. Although this is very inexpensive and easy to tally, it simply shows you geographic areas of *interest* in your destination, not necessarily actual travelers. Make sure you only allow one entry per person, or your results will be skewed by multiple entries.